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CHAPTER.01 – AFTERGLOW OF THE RED COMET (1)



第一章「赤い彗星の残照」1 CHAPTER.01 – AFTERGLOW OF THE RED COMET (1)

“Hey, Arlette. We’re up.”

Arlette Almage opened her eyes, disoriented, as a hand roughly nudged her on the shoulder.

“T minus 180.”

“Relative velocity to the target is +30.”

“No response from the passive sensors.”

The operators’ voices buzzed about from the speakers next to her ears, as she realized she had fallen asleep. Noticing the vibrations in the seat against her back had grown slightly while she slept, she figured that the ship had begun decelerating. She turned to the large man sitting next to her.

“We’re here?”

“Yeah we got here while you were konked out.”

As Danton Hyleg muttered in judgment, Arlette’s annoyance with him showed on her face. “*He’s is always like this,*” she thought to herself, “*I just woke up. Would it kill him to be a little more pleasant?*”

As she was just about to pick a fight with him, she noticed another man standing in the front of the room and quickly sat up, putting on a more professional face.

She took in her surroundings again. There were several men clad in the same normal suit as she was, sitting quietly in simple seats lining the outer wall. It was a cold, dull gray wall, without a single window. It was quite a stark sight.

“We finally come back, and we can’t even see the view...”

Just as she was regretting missing the scenery beyond those walls, a voice rang out from her helmet’s speaker. It was the young man standing in front of her.

“Ms. Arlette, I’d like you to take a look this.”

The man, Lieutenant JG Mehmet Merca, held out a tablet towards her with a peaceful smile on his face, rather uncharacteristic of a soldier.

“Are you certain this is the port you told us about?”

Arlette looked into the screen, which displayed the feed from one of the ship’s external cameras. A dock rolled out from a rough, angular rock surface, with a peculiar design drawn on it, exactly like the one she remembered.

“I’m sure of it. That’s the research facility’s private port.”

“Thank you.”

Mehmet gave her a slight smile and immediately went back to the control room. Once again, Arlette found herself staring at the windowless walls, and again she thought of the view that lay beyond them.

She was aboard an assault landing craft prepared by Mastema, a unit under the direct control of the Federation government. She knew that one more ship of the same model was traveling with them nearby. Each ship had a full Mastema company aboard. These two ships were headed somewhere that Arlette and Danton were

very familiar with, but it was not the same place they'd once known.

It was Axis, once an asteroid base, a stronghold for Neo Zeon. But on that fateful day – March 12th U.C.0093 – the asteroid was split in half. Their destination this time was on one of those halves.

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“Our destination, the research facility, lies on the half of Axis further ahead in orbit – on the side where asteroid Moussa was attached.”

“Yes, but the facility is not on Moussa itself. Moussa only contained residential quarters and some defensive weapons facilities.”

“Is Moussa a special place?”

“To the people who lived on it, yes. Its existence is... how do I put it... a symbol of sorts – a place of origin.”

This is what Arlette explained to Mehmet and the others, as they traveled there in a high-speed transport ship disguised as a civilian transport. During the discussion, Danton just stood to the side, nodding silently. Though he had also lived on Axis for a while, he had never been granted permission to enter Moussa. Newcomers such as him – who'd survived the One Year War and fled to Axis – were never allowed to even step foot in Moussa. It was treated as a kind of holy land.

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The increasing vibrations of the seats signaled that they would be docking soon. They had arranged for ship number 2 to land first and confirm that the area was safe, before ship number 1, with Arlette and the crew, would dock. The initiation of the docking sequence on their ship meant that ship number 2 had landed safely and there were no signs of danger. Before long, the light above each seat turned green, and the hatch creaked open, revealing a passage.

“This is some real VIP treatment.”

As Danton sighed, complaining under his breath, Arlette took his hand gently. She switched her speaker to touch communication, and her voice entered quietly into his helmet.

“We’ve come back.”

“It’s not like this is our home.”

“But the fact that it’s special hasn’t changed, right?”

Arlette’s voice was normal, but there was a slight flicker of emotion in it. Danton had been with her long enough to notice that much.

“I guess so. It is where the Flanagan Institute fell, after all.”

“This is where our lives were decided!”

“Yeah...”

Danton’s feelings didn’t change. They never had, and they never would.

“The only thing I’m thinking about is how to get you out of here alive. That’s all I ever thought about.”

“Just following the Captain’s orders, huh?”

“Of course.”

Arlette gave a slight giggle and gripped his hand a little tighter.

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Arlette and the crew got off the landing ship and passed through the passage from the docking port, entering the urban district, directly beneath the area where Moussa had been attached. This was where the research facility’s personnel and families had once lived.

However, three years had passed since Axis had fallen – more than enough time for the district to cease all functions.

“It feels so different. I remember it being smaller and messier.”

“Spaces feel bigger when there are no people around.”

Arlette and Danton, along with the Mastema special forces unit, lead by Mehmet, made their way down the district’s main street. The entire residential sector was built to rotate to create artificial gravity, but the equipment had stopped functioning. The team kicked off the ground with each step, being careful not to float too high. This made the place feel even more foreign to Arlette.

“The target facility should be at the end of this street, correct?”

Mehmet’s voice rang in from the speaker.

The Minovsky particle density inside Axis read very high, as if it were a lingering scent from the war. In their close formation, the radios were working fine, but if they were to spread out enough to lose sight of each other, it was likely they’d lose communications as well.

“It’s going to be a hassle if we get separated.” thought Danton as he answered Mehmet’s question.

“Yeah, it should be...”

“Understood. Thank you, Mr. Danton.”

“For what?”

“For your cooperation. I’d like to thank you again.”

“Oh. Yeah, no problem.”

Though Mehmet and his squad were wearing the same normal suits as Danton and Arlette, each member was equipped with some impressive heavy weaponry.

“You guys are really packing the heat.”

“The area may be uninhabited, but you never know if there are automatic defense systems still in operation.”

“I see. Good thinking.”

The soft way that Mehmet carried himself was severely mismatched with his imposing title, “Special Forces Commanding Officer.” His movements suggested that he was more used to socializing with civilians than military types. Then again, that’s if you could call Danton and Arlette civilians.

“We’ll be out of the urban district soon. We can just follow the passage from there.”

The facility, once called the “Maharaja Karn Memorial Research Facility,” referring to one of the most influential men involved in its establishment, was also where the Flanigan Institute saw it’s demise, and it was the place where Danton and Arlette’s futures had been determined. And now, Danton was here, guiding a special forces unit for the Federation that was once his enemy.

But he was seeking something that might be there – something which that man had left.

He wondered what Arlette was thinking about as he walked beside her. Danton was lost in his trivial thoughts, when it happened. There was a sudden tremor and a blinding flash of light.

“Ah!”

His body moved instantly, grabbing Arlette in both arms and diving into a nearby building. A moment later, bullets rained down on the spot they had just been standing, ricocheting off the stone pavement, shattering lights and ripping through billboards along the street.

“*Gunfire?! Here?! But why?!*” Danton racked his brain, as a shiver ran down his spine. He glanced outside and saw Mehmet and his squad scattering for cover. It was clear that the name “Special Forces” wasn’t just for show, as not a single member seemed unnerved by the sudden attack.

But there was something more surprising that caught his attention. This wasn’t normal gunfire raining down on them. It was

something much worse...

“No. There’s no way...”

Danton raised his head in shock, as dust clouds slowly kicked up around him. In the distance, a huge shadow stood between the buildings. There was no mistaking it. It was something he never expected to see in these long-abandoned ruins. A giant puppet, born of human technology and made for one purpose: war. As the giant rose in the dim light, Danton stared into its ominous eyes, and as the hair stood up on his skin, he whispered its name.

“A mobile suit...”

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In an instant, the abandoned buildings had become a living hell. The mobile suit chased after the team as they weaved through the alleys between buildings. They caught glimpses of the machine as they ran, and it was clear it wasn’t alone. There were at least two of them. Perhaps more...

No matter how much the Mastema special forces unit might excel at combat, they had no chance against multiple of those 20-meter-tall monsters. There was only one option left to them: to run as fast as they could.

“That was a Jegan... wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. An RGM-89. I couldn’t get a full look at it from the building, but I could tell that much.”

The RGM-89 Jegan – mass produced during the Second Neo Zeon War, as the Earth Federation’s primary weapon.

“Then shouldn’t it be on your side?”

“Sorry to tell you, but I’ve never seen that model before.”

As Danton snapped at him, Mehmet shook his head in response.

“There are a lot of units that slipped away during the confusion

after the war.”

“That’s some pretty competent supervision you guys have got there! Make sure you relay that to your higher ups when you get back!”

“I’ll be happy to, if we get back alive.”

Just then, Mehmet received a transmission from one of his soldiers.

“Commander! Everything’s set up!”

“Alright, fall back immediately! I’ll do the rest myself!”

As Mehmet shouted orders through the radio, he looked back and saw the Jegan closing in on them as it came out from between the buildings.

“3...2...1...”

“Lieutenant, what are you...”

“0!”

As soon as Mehmet finished the count, the buildings on either side of the Jegan erupted in explosion.

“Holy...!”

The blast wasn’t meant to hit the Jegan itself. The outer walls of the buildings around it had been blown away, letting out a thunderous roar, and rubble and dust scattered about the area, blocking the Jegan’s field of vision.

“What was that?”

“We set up some explosives while we were running.”

“Explosives? You even brought explosives with you?”

“We thought we might need them to blow open a sealed hatch. Of course, it’s nothing strong enough to take out a mobile suit, but

it can certainly bring down some buildings.”

“Man, you don’t mess around...”

“Don’t let your guard down. Here they come.”

A shadow moved about in the dust. Another Jegan appeared along with a third mobile suit. Arlette gasped in surprise at the sight of the third mobile suit. It was something she’d never seen in person, but she had seen that unique design in documents countless times before.

That white frame, those twin eyes, that v-shaped antenna...

“It’s...a Gundam...”

Arlette’s whisper was drowned out by the screaming voice of Mehmet.

“RUN FOR IT!!”

A brilliant blaze of light erupted from the muzzle of the Gundam’s rifle. They instinctively leaped into a small alleyway, as a red hot beam of light passed behind them, scorching the pavement.



The next part of the chapter comes out later this month! Stay tuned

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CHAPTER.01 – AFTERGLOW OF THE RED COMET (2)



第一章「赤い彗星の残照」2 CHAPTER.01 – AFTERGLOW OF THE RED COMET (2)

Arlette and the others hid in a back alley, peeking out to study the mobile suits as they strode through the streets. Several of Mehmet's subordinates who had gotten separated from the team had been able to rejoin them, but there were still many they were unable to contact. Fortunately, thanks to the Minovsky particles still shrouding the area, there was no fear of their location being discovered with heat sensors or the like. It would be the end of the line if the enemy indiscriminately shot at the whole area, but they probably wouldn't do something that reckless in such a narrow residential district.

“I never imagined a Gundam would appear... Just what in the hell is going on here?” Danton posed the question to Mehmet’s back as the latter surveyed the scene. “Think they’re after the same thing as you guys?”

“The probability of that is high, I’d say. Although we still don’t know who they really are.”

“Tch...”

“...”

Danton shrugged his shoulders dejectedly as a silent Arlette remained deep in thought beside him. There was no doubt that suit was a Gundam type. To be precise, it greatly resembled the Gundam-type mobile suits she was familiar with, but didn't exactly match any of them.

"A type that wasn't in the data... A new model? But, in that case..."

"So, what're we gonna do? We can't just sit here playing hide-and-seek."

"Seeing that we don't have any mobile suits of our own, these aren't the lot we can take on with any decent chance of winning. All we can do is keep moving so they don't find us."

"A mobile suit, huh?"

Those words made a single thought pop into Arlette's mind. If this place was still as it was in her memories, then they did have a way to break out of this deadlock.

"Hey! Arlette!"

Arlette suddenly ran out, and a panicked Danton chased her.

"Ugh, this girl! Always running off the moment she gets an idea!"

"Lieutenant Mehmet!"

Pushing through the fine dust, Arlette rushed over to Mehmet's side.

"Miss Arlette! It's dangerous here, fall back—" Mehmet yelled, but Arlette silenced him with a pleading look, then whispered:

"There's a mobile suit hangar directly below this residential area."

"Did you just say a hanger?"

Mehmet reflexively turned to face Arlette.

“It’s a hangar for storing prototype mobile suits the facility made for research purposes. There might be at least one still down there.”

Guessing what she was getting at, Mehmet’s eyes went wide.

“And you think...it could still be operational?”

“The power supply for everything related to the research facility is independent from the residential area.”

“Well...no, even so, it’s impossible. Even if there were a functioning mobile suit, there’s no pilot...”

“Yes there is. Right here.”

Arlette turned to look back with a bold smile. Danton shook his head, making a face as if he’d just bitten into a lemon.

“Who, me...?”

Memories of days spent with Arlette came flooding back into Danton’s mind. Their time in the facility, too, and the time after the war’s end, when he moved to Side 6.

That’s right. This little girl’s been getting me into trouble since way back in the day.

At the same time, he remembered something else: no matter how much he expressed his disapproval, she wouldn’t listen to a single bit of it.

“He’s a former Zeon test pilot. There’s no questioning his skill.”

“Yes, but that goes too far beyond merely receiving assistance from civilians...”

Danton responded to the bewildered Mehmet in a resigned tone.

“Far as I’m concerned, that’s not a problem.”

“Mr. Danton?”

“We’re already far past that point anyway, aren’t we?”

Danton shrugged as he started to walk away, followed by a smiling Arlette.

“See, Lieutenant? He’s okay with it, so...”

“Yeah, and who’s fault do you think that is?”

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Arlette and company distanced themselves from the main streets, heading toward the areas connected to the outskirts. Mehmet and his troops could hold the enemy mobile suits at bay, but probably not for long.

“I’m pretty sure we can take a shortcut through here.”

After passing through the gigantic, empty shaft of a disused freight elevator, Arlette and Danton landed in the mobile suit hangar that stretched out directly beneath the residential district.

“It’s up ahead. Hurry!”

“Hey, hold on!”

Arlette took the lead as she headed toward the hangar she was aiming for. Danton followed her, but when he noticed the identification number written there, his sour face soured even more.

“Say, this hangar, don’t tell me it’s...”

“Don’t you think this mobile suit is perfect for us?”

“You gotta be kidding me...”

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With an experienced hand, Arlette opened the emergency compressed air-style knob and slipped into the hangar. Danton followed close behind her. Just as expected, there was one mobile suit still housed there.

“That thing still active? Do you realize how many years it’s been

since then?”

“Hey, I made this baby. There’s no reason it’d be so weak as to get rusty in a few years.”

The huge, crimson fuselage closely resembled the high performance machine which had formerly been the symbol of Zeon during the One Year War: the MS-06. However, this one was bigger overall, and its rugged thrusters, placed throughout, made one feel its superior maneuverability. Furthermore, in many places along its body, it had various armaments the MS-06 did not.

“AMX-011S... The Zaku III Custom. It’s been a while. Have you been a good boy?”

The two of them kicked against the floor to float up to the cockpit. When they flipped the entry switch, the hatch opened easily.

“I knew it, the reserve power is still good! Come on, Danton, get in!”

“I know, I know.”

Danton sat down in the linear seat, and Arlette sat in front of him. In this position, Danton was practically hugging Arlette, but by now this caused him no discomfort. Back then, they were like this almost every day.

“Please start by activating the main fusion reactor. I’ll boot up the base system.”

“Since I don’t have my personal disk, the settings will have to stay as the Captain had them. I won’t be able to fight full strength, you know. The Captain was so picky about the settings...”

“You can take your complaints directly to the Captain. Besides, there’s no problem as far as your personal data’s concerned.”

Arlette winked mischievously, then reached into a pocket of her normal suit to pull out a well-used disk.

“Hey... I thought I told you to get rid of that thing.”

“Well, aren’t you glad I didn’t?”

“Tch...”

Upon inserting the disk into the slot, each component of the suit started setting itself up in accordance with Danton’s registered personal data. Next, when Danton activated the fusion reactor, the panoramic monitor in the cockpit lit up, displaying a CG view of their surroundings in the hangar. The light in the monoeye came on with a dull, “vwoon” sound.

“No rifle, huh? Guess I shouldn’t have expected one here.”

“It’s okay. The internal weapons will be more than enough.”

“Easy for you to say...”

The setup was completed as they continued their conversation, and all system indicators switched to green.

“Alright, we’re taking off! Hold on tight!” Danton yelled. The moment he was about to close the front hatch, Arlette suddenly stood up and nimbly exited the cockpit.

“Hey!”

“You won’t go all-out if I’m on board, right? I’ll be waiting with Lieutenant Mehmet, so make quick work of those guys then come meet up with us.”

“Hey, there’s no guarantee I won’t get killed instead! See if Mr. Lieutenant can protect you when that happens!”

Danton cursed at Arlette, who simply smiled mockingly while waving her hand as she walked away.

“You’ve got the Captain’s orders, right? Do your best! I love you as a father!”

“You little brat!”

The cockpit hatch snapped shut as if to add a parting slap.

Awakened from its transient slumber, the red giant took off with a roar.

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Meanwhile, in the residential district, Mehmet and the Mastema Special Forces under his command were engaged in a battle for their lives. Hiding within the cloud of debris, Mehmet sneaked up on a Jegan from behind. Without making a sound, he leaped into the air, and just when he'd reached the Jegan's torso, he immediately backed away.

“Alright...”

In that instant, a blazing light split the area around the Jegan's cockpit open. The large frame of the mobile suit faltered.

Having noticed the confrontation, another machine rushed over, but Mehmet was faster: he aimed the muzzle of the small rocket launcher he'd brought along at the wounded Jegan's cockpit and immediately pulled the trigger. Riding the bomb blast, he got away from the scene. Behind him, the huge Jegan went limp, like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“I trained in low gravity hand-to-hand combat countless times, but never imagined I'd take on a mobile suit like that...”

With a wry smile, Mehmet confirmed the situation. Attacking in waves with explosives set in various places and with the arms they carried, they had succeeded in immobilizing one enemy mobile suit. For having fought a mobile suit in the flesh, it was an astounding military gain. However, the losses were proportionately larger: more than half the unit had already been taken out. There were still two other enemy mobile suits. More importantly, the Gundam type remained unscathed.

“...!”

Mehmet looked up and bit his lip. There, right before his very eyes, was the Gundam type suit. Rifle at the ready, it slowly

descended toward him. The muzzle was aimed dead at him.

“I knew I couldn’t stay hidden forever...”

At this point, what resources he had left were not enough to even try mounting a counterattack. With the Minovsky particles interfering with communications, he couldn’t call for reinforcements from the squad he’d left on the perimeter either.

“Well...there’s nothing else I can do.”

Mehmet closed his eyes in resignation, but then —

Suddenly, the ground in front of him exploded with a thunderous roar.

“?!”

A red flash crossed the dim airspace. In that instant, that’s how Mehmet’s eyes perceived it. The large, radiant crimson body cracked the stone pavement as it soared upward, crashing head-on into the Gundam type. The entangled mobile suits ascended until they smashed into the dome above the residential district.

Mehmet, who had automatically hidden in the rubble; his subordinates; and the Jegan type that had been after them; all of them could do nothing other than stare, dumbfounded.

“Shit! Just as I thought, this thing’s got way too much pep to use in a narrow space like this!”

Firing thrusters, Danton tried to peel the body of his suit off the dome by force. The Gundam type remained motionless, sunken into the dome. With that one blow, it had been rendered temporarily inoperative.

Trying to help its partner, the Jegan type on the ground started shooting.

“No need to get impatient, I’ll spar with you next!”

Skillfully dodging the spray of bullets, Danton closed in on the

Jegan with the Zaku III Custom. Just then, Arlette's voice rang out.

"Danton, you can't blow up the mobile suit's fusion reactor!
Smash the cockpit instead!"

Looking down at the sub monitor, Danton saw Arlette running with a portable laser comm device in hand.

"Easier said than done! I'm not the Captain, you know!"

"The Captain's former test pilot shouldn't whine!"

"Dammit!"

Cursing, Danton turned his attention back to the Jegan before him. He set his sights on the cockpit at its abdomen, and pulled the trigger without hesitation. The mega particle cannon mounted on the Zaku III Custom's chin blew out the Jegan's cockpit with precise aim.

"One more to go..."

Turning his back on the silenced Jegan, Danton once again fired up his thrusters to soar into the air.

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"Incredible..."

Mehmet could only watch on in blank amazement as the Zaku III Custom's fierce attack brought down the Jegan in the blink of an eye. Arlette walked up to his side.

"Is that... Mr. Danton inside of that red mobile suit?"

"Yes, it's him."

"I'd heard it had been a very long since he piloted anything..."

"That's right. But that's not the type of thing that would cause him any problems."

"Oh?"

“Because...even that person acknowledged Danton.”

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The Zaku III Custom rose on its thrusters. Up ahead, the Gundam type which had been half-buried in the dome thanks to Danton's ramming attack was just then recovering from its system shutdown. Its twin eyes lit up with a “vwoon.”

“Oh, you should've taken a longer nap!”

But it was already too late.

“I don't know if he's trying to evade or counterattack, but at this range, I better fly at him before he can make a move. I'd rather immobilize the suit without smashing the cockpit so I can find out who's behind this, but...”

As Danton was thinking that, in the next instant, his overconfident smile froze on his face.

“?!”

The Gundam forcefully fired up its thrusters, heading toward Danton.

“He's fast!”

The Gundam closed the distance between them in a flash, bearing down on the Zaku III Custom. Danton had planned on flying into its chest, but at this rate, he would end up being rammed into it instead.

The Gundam raised its free arm as if in an uppercut, aiming for the Zaku III Custom's head.

“Like I'd let you hit me!”

Danton immediately bent over backwards to evade. But right then, the armor on the Gundam's arm slide back without warning, and a dimly gleaming muzzle peeped out.

“...?!”

In an instant, a glaring flash filled Danton’s field of vision. The hidden weapon built into the Gundam’s arm — probably a beam cannon — unleashed its fire.

× × ×

“Mr. Danton!”

Mehmet, who had been watching with bated breath, screamed.

At point-blank range, no matter how capable Danton was, not even he could have evaded that...

“It’s okay.”

“What...?”

Mehmet turned around without thinking.

“It’s okay. He... won’t lose.”

At Mehmet’s side, Arlette watched over the battle unfolding high above with a gentle smile on her face.

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As if in shock, the Gundam type froze for a second. Its beam had barely grazed the Zaku III Custom’s nose.

The Zaku III Custom balled up its fists, and started whaling on the Gundam’s arms.

“!!”

The beam cannon mounted on the Gundam’s arms let out violent sparks.

“Hmph!”

From that position, Danton twisted his upper body to deliver a roundhouse kick.

“!!”

Although the Gundam immediately guarded with both its sparking arms, it fell out of its stance, and fired up its thrusters to put some distance between them.

“I...won’t lose.”

Danton muttered to himself without realizing it.

He’d made a promise. There was absolutely no way he could sully that person’s name while fighting in their mobile suit. Especially not against a Gundam type!

“Danton!”

Arlette’s voice rang out from the communications device.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

With a roar, Danton stepped on the throttle, fired his thrusters again, and charged at the Gundam.



The front armor at the Zaku III Custom’s waist sprang up,

revealing a beam cannon which served as a saber loaded within .

The two mobile suits closed in on each other. The Gundam immediately tried to aim its beam rifle, but the damage it had sustained earlier seemed to be slowing down its movements. At about the same time, the Zaku III Custom's beam cannon blasted the Gundam's rifle away. Having lost its weapon, the Gundam type shook violently, losing its balance, but it fired its thrusters to rise up into the upper airspace.

“You’re not getting away!”

Danton was about to give chase, but a transmission from Arlette made him stop short.

“Wait, Danton!”

When he looked, he saw the Gundam gaining altitude, escaping toward the hatch that connected to the interior of Axis.

Danton didn’t try to pursue it. If he tried to fight there, he would put Arlette in danger. He was curious about who his opponent had been, but right now, her safety was the top priority.

By the time Arlette and Mehmet had run over to the mobile suit’s feet, the Gundam had already flown out of the area.

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“A red mobile suit...”

Mehmet muttered under his breath as he stared at the Zaku III Custom standing still in the abandoned streets.

“It really took me by surprise... That form, it’s exactly...”

Next to him, Arlette smiled quietly.

“This mobile suit... A certain woman made it for the person she loved.”

“Eh?”

“Poor woman, just pushed around by the waves of destiny, the future of Axis left in her hands... She developed that mobile suit just to try to get the person she loved to pilot it.”

With that, Arlette closed her eyes, as if to remember something.

“She said it was so that he would stay on Axis... forever by her side.”

“That’s...”

“Of course, he left this place behind without piloting it even once.”

It was exactly as if she were talking to her past self rather than explaining things to Mehmet...

Meanwhile, Lieutenant JG Mehmet Merca listened to her words absentmindedly, while staring at the huge crimson machine towering above him.

CHAPTER.02 – LOOKING BACK: RIAH (1)



二章「追憶～リーアにて～」1

CHAPTER.02 – LOOKING BACK: RIAH (1)

Side 5. Known as Riah, the area had declared its neutrality at the very beginning of the One Year War as Side 6, and was one of the few Sides who escaped the horrors of war. Even after the numbering was changed due to the Colony Reclamation Project and it became known as Side 5 did it rarely get involved in major battles.

One of the colonies of Riah was the Libot Colony.

Its pastoral townscapes, reminiscent of 20th century Europe, was home to key figures of political and business circles of both the Zeon and the Federation. The quality of life was good. And a good living meant that various trades were able to flourish. Thus it was here that the Danton Cleaning Firm was able to enjoy the fruits of the colony's prosperity.

Hanging her last freshly cleaned bedsheet on the line, Arlette Hyleg stretched her arms towards the sky. Looking up at the sky from the rooftop, she could see vast expanses of green on the opposite side of the cylindrical colony. According to the daily weather forecast from the colony's management system, there was no rain to be expected all day. Left on the line, the sheets would be completely dry by evening.

Arlette tossed aside the clothes basket, leaned against a railing on the rooftop and decided to take a little breather.

One hundred years had already passed since mankind made its way into space, and for sure, there was no need to dry clothes in such a primitive manner, but it was this analog way of doing things that made the Danton Cleaning Firm popular with nearby clientele.

Not only were the clothes dried in the sun, but they came back pristine. The multitude of sheets billowing in the wind in front of her were, without exception, a gleaming white.

“Yup, doing pretty good.”

Arlette couldn’t help the satisfied grin on her face, pleased at the performance of the washing machine that she herself had modified. It was a budget mass-produced thing that Danton, the shopkeeper, had brought from somewhere, but she had tuned it to peak performance. She was sure that no matter where you looked, in Riah or even in the Earth Sphere, would you find a better washing machine. If anyone saw this who knew her engineering skills, they’d hang their heads in despair at the talent wasted. But Arlette herself found only satisfaction in her job.

Instead of looking back at the past, now was about focusing on day to day life.

She was grown up enough to think about it like that, at least.

Just as midday passed by, and her mind wandered to lunch, the cowbell in the vestibule made a sounс.

“Hm? A customer?”

Stretching forward from the railing and leaning over the side, she spotted an Elecar she’d never seen before parked in front of the shop.

Two men got out, both dressed in tight suits, and quietly entered the shop.

“...”

Arlette's brows furrowed ever so slightly into a frown.

Two men in suits were not the kind of clientele they expected at the cleaners.

Pushing her anxiety aside, Arlette began to climb down the stairs.

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The manager of the Danton Cleaning Firm, Danton Hyleg, looked at the sudden arrivals like there was a bitter taste in his mouth. He wore an apron, but it was clear that it didn't suit his large frame, and when he shifted moodily, the wooden chair holding his weight creaked softly. It might seem strange for a shopkeeper to not welcome customers, but Danton wasn't a very enthusiastic shopkeeper to begin with. So long as they had requests from a few regulars every day, Arlette and he would at least have food on the table. He didn't feel the need to turn his passion to the trade. Even now, he was killing time with a jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces were scattered across the counter.

Having roughly gathered them together and restored them to their box, he turned to the two customers.

"What can I do for you?"

The men's suits were a dull gray.

One looked like a young elite from some firm or another. The other was a little older, but from his behavior, it seemed like he was a subordinate. Neither seemed like the type that needed to visit a cleaning joint. But beyond that, Danton's attention was drawn to the well-trained muscles hidden beneath the suits and their wary bearing.

Soldiers.

This was hardly surprising. He had anticipated that people from the military would one day knock on his door. The problem was what they wanted.

No matter how things went, it would be ugly. So how do I deal with

this...

As he turned these thoughts over in his mind, the door behind him opened, and Arlette, coming down from the roof, popped her face through the gap.

“Customers?”

“Yes.”

Turning around, he gestured for her to stay out back. But Arlette stood nonchalantly in front of the door, refusing to budge. It wasn’t that she hadn’t noticed, she only pretended to.

“Seriously...”

He felt he was being treated with less and less respect as the years went by. As Danton thought on his woes, the younger of the arrivals spoke up.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Danton Highleg. And it’s Ms Arlette Almage, I believe...”

“!!”

On hearing this, Danton and Arlette both held their breaths. On paper, they were supposed to be father and daughter now. This man however knew Arlette’s real name. They didn’t know how much the man knew, but it was clear now that this was no ordinary customer.

“You soldiers? Or civil servants?”

“No pleasantries, I see... My name is Mehmet Merca. And this is...”

“Now wait a second. If we’re going to talk about things like that, let’s do it somewhere else.”

Having stopped the the man who called himself Mehmet from introducing his companion, Danton stood up from his chair, made his way around the counter and stood in front of them.

“There’s a little cafe on the other side of the street. Why don’t you go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

Undonning his apron and throwing it to Arlette, he threw a glance to the men.

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna run or hide.”

The older man looked like he wanted to say something, but the younger one stopped him and nodded. As the men exited the door, Arlette checked that the door had closed before finally opening her mouth.

“Those people know about me.”

“Looks that way.”

“Looks like we’ll have to move again...”

“...”

Before opening the cleaning business, Arlette and Danton had already made their way through a number of towns.

Their history, siding with the losing Neo Zeon army in the second Neo Zeon War a couple years back, was one of the reasons.

After the war, having lost their base on Axis, they had scattered all over the Earth Sphere and begun a new life. Many regions still harbored anti-Zeon sentiment, and it was clear that not all areas would give them a warm welcome. But apart from that, there was another reason why Arlette could not stay in a town for too long. Though they acted like Danton and she were father and daughter, the truth was that they were not related by blood.

During the One Year War, she was the subject of many experiments in the Flanagan Institute, a Newtype research institute of the Principality of Zeon. As a result, the flow of time in her body was abnormally slow. That is, she didn’t grow old at the right speed.

That was why they couldn’t stay in one place for too long.

Even the people of this town would begin to get suspicious if she remained young.

“You know I really liked this town...”

“Well, let’s see what these men want. If we can deal with it peacefully, then that’s the best way out.”

Replacing the apron with his own jacket hanging on the wall, Danton made his way to the door.

“Mind the shop. Father’s orders.”

“...Sure.”

Giving Danton a little wave, Arlette quickly donned the apron and sat down on the chair behind the counter.